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AUTHOR Harker, W. John
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the need for remedial reading instruction at the secondary level and examines the situation facing the teacher and student. It is argued that the reading teacher working with secondary remedial students must help students acquire the requisite skills for successful learning through reading and meet the personal needs of students as well. The first step toward effective remediation lies in accurate and specific diagnosis of the particular reading difficulties students are experiencing. Once the difficulties have been diagnosed, treatment must be prescribed in direct relationship to the diagnosis. The skills the student is unable to perform during diagnosis, whether basic or applied, are the skills the student needs to be taught. The reading teacher must provide strict attention to diagnosis and treatment and must also seek to create a learning environment which answers the personal as well as the educational needs of the students. (TS)

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Dr. W. John Harker
Faculty of Education
University of Victoria
P.O. Box 1700
Victoria, British Columbia
Canada
V8W 2Y2

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"Instructional Responses to Reading Difficulties in the Secondary Grades: What the Teacher Can Do to Help the Student"

Session: Remedial Reading in the Secondary Grades

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The need for remedial reading instruction at the secondary level has been firmly established. Research has consistently revealed that, even in the most favorable educational environments, the range in reading ability increases as students move through the grades (2,4). In fact, Goodlad (6) maintains that superior teaching tends to increase the range of reading ability rather than decrease it since, with a superior learning environment, more able students are permitted to realize more fully their potential for reading development.

The Situation Facing the Teacher

It is not surprising, therefore, that the situation facing the secondary reading teacher is one in which, as Burmeister (3) has indicated, the range of reading ability in the typical secondary grade classroom may be conservatively estimated at the number of years designated by the number of the grade level. For instance, in the typical tenth grade class, a range of reading ability of ten grade levels may be expected, such as grades four through

thirteen. Given this situation, a significant number of secondary students will become clients for remedial instruction by the reading teacher.

The Situation Facing the Student

When the focus is shifted to the individual student who requires remedial instruction in reading, insights are gained into the "educational world" in which he lives. Searching for the initial cause of his reading difficulties is in most cases futile. The remedial student often has a history of reading failure going back to the elementary grades. By the time he reaches the secondary school, he frequently exhibits a constellation of interacting causes and effects of an educational, developmental, emotional, environmental and physical nature, the initial cause of reading failure having often been overcome through maturation or other factors. In the secondary grades, this student is confronted with a learning situation in which more and more emphasis is placed on independent learning through reading. Predictably, he finds himself alienated, frustrated, and confused by constantly being expected to perform tasks which are beyond his ability. School becomes a place where failure is consistently experienced and may be constantly expected.

Deviant Behavior

The result of this frustration is often a pattern of deviant in-school behavior (10). If learning to read and, more important for the secondary student, reading to learn may be viewed as developmental tasks as defined by Havighurst (9), that is, tasks

which the student must learn to perform at certain points in his life in order to maintain his personal happiness and societal approval, then the impact of reading failure on the personal needs of the student becomes more explicable. The student is unable to keep up with his peer group in school achievement, his self concept becomes eroded, and in order to maintain his self respect compensatory deviant behavior emerges. This behavior is often characterized by either withdrawing from the school situation and thereby pretending that school success is not important, or by attacking the school in an attempt to establish an alternate value system within which the student may experience success and some measure of peer approval. Whichever course the student's behavior takes, it only serves to further his reading difficulty, and to generate more stress (1) in the school learning situation.

Implications

The implications for the reading teacher of this educational world in which the secondary retarded reader finds himself are twofold. On one hand, the educational needs of the student demand remediation: the student must be taught the requisite skills for successful learning through reading in the secondary grades. On the other hand, the personal needs of the student must be met: he must find in the remedial learning environment an accepting atmosphere wherein his deviant behavior may be ameliorated. It is this interaction between the educational and personal needs of

the student which provides the focus for remedial instruction.

Diagnosis

The first step toward effective remediation lies in accurate and specific diagnosis of the particular reading difficulties students are experiencing. Very often, the teacher will find two orders of reading difficulty among secondary students. The first involves basic skill deficiencies--skills which for a variety of reasons have not been learned in the elementary grades. The second involves an inability to apply skills to the reading of content area materials. Students in this latter group will possess basic skills but lack an understanding of how and when to apply these skills when confronted with content area reading assignments. In the content area classroom, these students often appear to be indistinguishable from those lacking in basic skills with the result that the magnitude of observed reading difficulty will appear similar for both groups. The distinction between the two groups is further masked by the fact that students in the second group sometimes display a certain degree of basic skills deficiency, while students in both groups exhibit deviant behavior born of frustration with school learning.

To be valid, diagnosis should involve students reading content area material similar to that from which they are expected to learn. It is only in this way that those specific reading difficulties which inhibit school learning can be determined. Diagnosis should not be isolated in an artificial test-taking situation. Standardized "diagnostic" reading tests for the most part alienate students

who have often already been tested extensively while at the same time they measure little more than students' reluctant efforts to perform highly artificial but easily measured test-taking tasks. It is more valid for the teacher to construct informal tests which involve the students reading content-area type material selected to approximate their instructional reading level. This level can be quickly determined by using Fry's "rule of 1-out-of-20" (5, p. 13). Here the student is asked to read orally: approximately one error in twenty running words indicates the student's instructional level.

In administering the informal test, the student is first asked to read silently the content-area material selected for the tests. This is followed by two types of questions designed to determine the nature of the student's reading difficulty. The first type of question is intended to assess the student's level of basic skill proficiency. These questions focus on different word attack strategies (phonic, structural, and contextual analysis) and selected comprehension skills at different levels (literal, inferential, and critical), and are either identical or similar in format to the questions used in a conventional informal reading inventory (11).

The second type of question is formulated to determine the student's ability to apply reading skills to the understanding and retention of content-area material. Shepherd (14) and Viox (15) have both given extensive direction to teachers in how to prepare informal measures of students' reading and study skills in order to assess their readiness to learn from reading content

area material. The validity of these questions is directly determined by the extent to which they accurately represent the actual reading and study tasks which confront students in particular learning situations within the school curriculum.

This functional approach to diagnosis gives the teacher a clear picture of the student's reading difficulties at an actual performance level. Basic skills weaknesses are revealed as are difficulties in applying skills to content area reading. In both cases, the student's reading performance is measured within a context similar to that in which he normally confronts reading tasks.

Treatment

There is a direct relationship between diagnosis and treatment. The deficiencies detected during diagnosis prescribe specifically the kinds of educational experiences needed by the student to overcome his reading difficulties (7). The skills the student is unable to perform during diagnosis, whether basic or applied, are the skills he needs to be taught.

The context within which remedial teaching occurs should parallel the context within which diagnosis is conducted--a close approximation of the actual content area learning situation, but with suitable adjustment made to the difficulty of the reading material used (13). Students' difficulties should be remedied by teaching directly from content-area type instructional material with direct attention to specific skills deficiencies. The sterile,

mechanical kit and workbook-type materials so often promoted by commerical publishers often do little more than train students in the mechanics of the material with little or no transfer of any skills gained to the content area learning situation. Neither can student interest generated solely on the basis of so-called "high-interest low-vocabulary" materials which frequently ignore skills development be relied upon (8). Student motivation must be supported by reading achievement based on skills development within the context of school learning rather than on some artificially induced euphoria born of a sudden interest in reading which can only lead to later defeat and further frustration when deflated by the inevitable reading failure resulting from skills deficiencies.

The Learning Environment

Together with strict attention to diagnosis and treatment, the reading teacher must seek to create a learning environment which answers the personal as well as the educational needs of students. Relatively little attention has been paid to the nature of this environment in remedial teaching or to the ways in which the teacher may go about creating it.

Given the deviant behavior of most retarded readers, a teacher who either condemns or condones this behavior is likely to do little more than perpetuate it. Deviant student behavior is more often ameliorated by reading success than by direct teacher intervention since reading success diminishes the frustration which initially gives rise to deviant behavior. But reading success involves

learning, and learning involves the student in risk-taking. While it is a sound basic assumption that most remedial students want to succeed, it must be recognized that they want to succeed with safety--with a minimum of risk-taking. For the student who has been emotionally battered by repeated school failure, more failure resulting from risk-taking in the remedial situation is about the last thing he needs. The retarded reader is therefore in a conflict position since on one hand he needs to succeed with reading, while on the other hand he must risk further failure and frustration while engaged in the learning process which will lead to success.

The key to resolving this conflict within the student lies in the learning environment created by the teacher. Otto and McMenemy have described the optimum learning environment for remedial teaching as one of " nonjudgmental acceptance"(12, p. 350). In this environment, the learner is accepted as he is, as an individual with personal as well as educational needs. A program of remediation is developed for him through which his reading difficulties are treated, and as a result his deviant behavior may be ameliorated. The risk-taking required for learning is conducted in a non-threatening atmosphere where the inevitable short-term failures associated with risk-taking do not lead to humiliation or defeat. In this environment, the many developmental tasks associated with learning to read and reading to learn which have been missed by the adolescent retarded reader are recapitulated,

and through this process the student can begin to regain his self-respect and confidence in the total school learning environment.

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